

Urban Dirt

Benefits of Native Plants!

Gardening Events and Information for Texans

The Benefits of Growing Native Plants

Article and photos by Robin Yates, Master Gardener

Definition - *Native Plant*

Native Plant Society of Texas

A plant that evolved and occurs naturally, with no human intervention in a region or environment; present prior to Euro-American settlement.

When landscaping our homes, we have a seemingly endless supply of options. When it comes time to buy the plants to be placed, why should I include native plants in my decisions? That is a good question! I hope to pique your curiosity about the many benefits of planting native plants in your yard. I suggest that we look with a different set of glasses when we are choosing the plants we will place in our yards and gardens.

First, what do we mean by the term native plant? According to the Native Plant Society of Texas, a native plant is one that evolved and occurs naturally, with no human intervention, in a particular region or environment (Native Plant Landscaping Course, Level 1). A Texas native plant is one which is indigenous to Texas prior to Euro-American settlement.

When we visit a nursery, what do we usually ask about the plants we buy? How much does it cost, what color is it, what size will it be when mature, is it drought, flood, frost, and heat tolerant? But what if we looked at our yard in a different way?

Wildlife Habitat - A few years ago, I developed a habit of following the pollinators when I visit my local nursery. I look for the butterflies, bees, dragon flies and moths. The plants that fed them were likely to end up on my cart and planted in my yard. As

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Robin's front yard

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Have Garden Questions? Submit your questions to: <https://hcmga.tamu.edu/ask-a-question/>

UPCOMING EVENTS - MARCH 2023

Educational Programs

Home Grown Lecture Series - This webinar is provided by our Harris County Ag/ Natural Resources Department. Registration is required for these free events. Please visit: HomeGrown2023A.eventbrite.com/

Mar 2., 10 - 11a.m. *Top "T" Questions: Tomatoes, Turf & Trees* by Brandi Keller, Harris County Extension Agent – Horticulture

Mar. 7, First Tuesday 11 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. Program: *TBA* Meeting in-person at Trini Mendenhall Community Center, 1414 Wirt Road, Houston 77055

Green Thumb Workshop: Benefits of Native Plants

Mar. 25, 10 -11 a.m. *Benefits of Native Plants*, Learn how to grow and propagate native plants. Each participant will go home with seeds and a native plant!

\$15 Registration required: bit.ly/3H3K9ew. 1210 Genoa Red. Bluff Rd., Houston 77034

Green Thumb Gardening Series

We have collaborated with the Harris County Public Library and Houston Community College. Join us for one, or both!

Benefits of Growing Native Plants

Mar. 20, 10 - 11:30 a.m. For the HCC program, register in advance to receive the link: hccs.edu/community-learning-workshops

Mar. 21, 11 a.m. - 12 p.m. Simply visit the Harris County Public Library System. No reservation required. Watch on Facebook – facebook.com/harriscountyp/live

Plant Sales

Mar. 1-18, Southeast Online Fruit Tree Sale

The HCMGA online store, <https://hcmga.tamu.edu/shop/> opens Mar. 1st - 16th. Plant pickup day is March 18th, 9 a.m. - 1 p.m. Citrus is not available at this location. Remaining plant inventory is available for purchase. 1210 Genoa Red Bluff Rd, Houston 77034.

Mar, 25 & 26, Northwest Spring Sale - Fruit Trees & Perennials, 9 a.m. - 1 p.m. or until supplies last, 8877 Barker Cypress Rd at the The Berry Center, Cypress 77433. All HCMGA citrus will be sold *only* at this location.

Open Garden Day at Genoa Friendship Gardens

Mar. 20, 8:30 - 11 a.m. The garden will be open to tour and master gardeners will be available to answer gardening questions. Plants will be for sale in the greenhouse. And, visit the *Ask a Master Gardener* table for additional gardening information. 1210 Genoa Red Bluff Rd., Houston 77034

Youth Activities

GPN - Look for the **Growing with Plants and Nature** table at following plant sales and farmers markets:

Mar. 14 & 16, Spring Break at Woodchase Park, 3951 Woodchase Dr, Houston 77042
10 a.m. - 1 p.m.

Mar. 18, Towne Lake Farmers Market; 9955 Barker Cypress Rd., Cypress 77433
9:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.

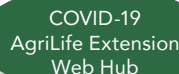
Mar. 18, Southeast Plant Sale; 1210 Genoa Red Bluff Rd., Houston 77043, 9 a.m. - 1 p.m.

Mar. 25 & 26, Northwest Plant Sale at the Berry Center, 8877 Barker Cypress Rd., Cypress 77433, 9 a.m. - 1 p.m.

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Please visit us at the social media pages below:

- [Harris County Extension Horticulture Facebook Page](#)
- [Harris County Master Gardeners Facebook Page](#)
- [Harris County Family and Community Health Facebook Page](#)

For more information on COVID-19, please visit the following website:



Texas AgriLife Extension Service
Horticulture Program in Harris County
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Houston, TX 77040 713.274.0950

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it turns out, the wildlife evolved with the indigenous flora and are dependent upon it for survival. We are in the midst of what scientists are calling the sixth mass extinction. Twenty-one species were removed from the Endangered Species List in September of 2021, not because they had recovered, but because they were extinct. You may have heard or read of the decline of the monarch butterfly



Purple Coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea*

or the decreasing songbird population in North America. As native plants evolved simultaneously with insects and other wildlife, they provide the habitats those species recognize and require for survival. Our ecosystem depends upon insects, pollinators and others to survive. By placing a native plant in your garden, you are helping the entire ecosystem.

Less Maintenance & Expense - Because native plants are the survivors over millennia in this climate and soil, they are naturally hardy. They do not need the herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, and fertilizers that many introduced plants need. Thus, we incur less maintenance expense, time, and there is less runoff pollution in our waterways.

Weather Tolerant - These plants are survivors! You can think of them as the champions, who over millennia, developed and out-competed others to be here today. Natives have a survival advantage. They are more likely to survive freezes, drought, heat, and flooding.



Plains Coreopsis, *Coreopsis tinctoria*

Flooding Solution - Here in the Houston area, we don't have just "rain". We have rain events. We experience a lot of water in a short time span. The potential for flash flooding is commonly heard during our weather forecasts. On a regular basis, we see green areas being bulldozed over and pavement put in its place. Parks turned into parking lots. Where can the water from our rain events go? According to Texas Parks and Wildlife, our ecosystem is Gulf Prairies and Marshes. Many of the native prairie plants have deep root systems (<https://dyckarboretum.org/roots-of-native-plants/>). These roots create channels to draw rainwater from the surface, deep into the ground, replenishing the aquifer. This is an oft-neglected flood mitigation strategy. Historically, our common method of handling rainwater involves channelizing our bayous. We make them deeper, wider, and straighter to remove it as



Snow on the Prairie, *Euphorbia bicolor*

quickly as possible. Whereas nature deals with heavy rain by spreading it out, slowing it down, and soaking it in.

Water Purification - The deep root system of native plants also enables them to filter the water of pollutants, cleaning the water before it re-enters the water cycle.

Water Conservation - Because native plants evolved here, in this ecosystem, they will survive on local rainfall once established.

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This decreases supplemental watering needs--an important consideration, as fresh water is a limited resource.

Carbon sequestration - When annuals die and perennials go dormant, the receding roots decay and become Soil Organic Compounds (SOC). This is how carbon is taken from the atmosphere through photosynthesis and placed in the soil, positively affecting climate change.

Improved Air Quality - Native plants also improve air quality through photosynthesis and less maintenance. Gasoline powered lawn equipment-mowers, weed eaters, and leaf blowers, are a major source of 'nonroad gasoline emissions' (<https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2015-09/documents/banks.pdf>). The less we use gasoline powered lawn devices, the better for air quality. The noise of these machines is also a source of audible pollution.

Sense of Place - Our culture has tried to separate our daily lives from the nature around us. Yet many of us have found spending time in nature an effective strategy for dealing with the difficulties of the pandemic. Interacting with nature has proven to reduce anxiety and depression. Many of my neighbors tell me they smile when they walk past our yard, as there are flowers bloom-

ing in every season. Native plants literally bring nature to your doorstep. All I need to do to relax out in nature is to step outside!

We have reviewed a number of benefits of native plants, so what can we do? The good news is any native plant you put in your yard or garden helps.



American basketflower, *Centurea americana*

Start with just one plant. You don't need to make any big changes. Start small and observe.

For further reading on this subject, I recommend Doug Tallamy's books *Bringing Nature Home* and *Nature's Best Hope*. He is an entomologist at the University of Delaware whose research focuses on the benefits of native plants. He is leading a movement he has named Homegrown National Park, where everyone who plants a native plant in their yard can add their yard to the map, in an effort to increase the use of native plants in our landscaping.

I am taking the Native Plant Society of Texas' Native Plant Landscaping Certification classes (<https://npsot.org/wp/nlcp/>) and using what I learn to develop a new bed at the Genoa Friendship Gardens. Come meet the plants and learn how to bring native plants to your yard and garden!



Scarlet sage,
Salvia coccinea

2023 Harris County Master Gardeners Sales!

It's a new year and the area has just experienced another hard freeze. Hopefully, your fruit trees and other plants survived. If not we are here to help! Or if you just want to expand your fruit tree collection, grow some tomatoes and veggies or enhance your yard with colorful plantings in 2023, our sales are just around the corner.

We will have three in-person sales on the Northwest side of town. Our online sales have a pickup location on the Southeast side of town at Genoa Friendship Gardens. The pickup day offers an in-person sale opportunity of remaining plant inventory.

Check out the info below for the sale of your choice!



HARRIS COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS 2023 PLANT SALES

For more information go to: hcmga.tamu.edu/plant-sales/
For questions, please email: plantsales.harrishort@gmail.com



NORTHWEST SALES

9:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. or until supplies last

New location:

5373 Franz Rd, Katy, TX @ St. Paul's Episcopal Church

February 11th

Fruit Tree Sale

All HCMGA citrus plants will be sold only at this location.

April 22nd

Spring Sale -

Perennials & Peppers

Cy-Fair Home and Outdoor Living Show at the

BERRY CENTER

9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. or until supplies last

8877 Barker Cypress Rd., Cypress, TX 77433

March 25th & 26th

Spring Sale - Fruit Trees & Perennials

SOUTHEAST SALES

Citrus not available at this location.

9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. or until supplies last

Genoa Friendship Gardens (GFG), 1210 Genoa Red Bluff Rd., Houston, 77034

Online sale at: <https://hcmga.tamu.edu/shop/>

February 18th & 20th

Tomato Sale

Online store opens Feb. 1st - Feb. 16th

Pick up day - Feb. 18th

March 18th & 20th

Fruit Tree Sale

Online store opens Mar. 1st - Mar. 16th

Pick up day - Mar. 18th

An in-person sale option is available for remaining plant inventory on all Saturday pickup days. Southeast Sale ONLY: Order online for the best selections. Monday is our Open Garden Day; tours of our demonstration gardens and plant trials will be provided along with plant sales.

April 15th & 17th

Perennials & Peppers

Online store opens Apr. 1st - Apr. 13th

Pick up day - Apr. 15th

May 20th & 22nd

Vegetables & Herbs

Online store opens May 1st - May 18th

Pick up day - May 20th



Individuals with disabilities who require an auxiliary aid, service or accommodation in order to participate are encouraged to contact the County Extension Office prior to the sale to determine how reasonable accommodations can be made.

Opportunities abound for MGs & Interns!

by Carolyn Boyd, HCMGA President

The HCMGA needs YOU! Our plant sales are the primary source of funding for the organization, and member participation is vital for success.

We have four remaining plant sales and three post-pick up sale days at GFG's Open Garden Days. These events provide multiple MG volunteer opportunities. Read the *Weekly Update* for information and go to SignUp.com to sign up for any (or all!) of the sales.

A plant sale is a great opportunity to gain plant knowledge. It may be via researching plant info for the database, creating plant signage or interaction with other master gardeners and customers. I've found that most customers on a "plant hunt" love to talk about their plant experiences!

Please join in the 2023 HCMGA sale experience!

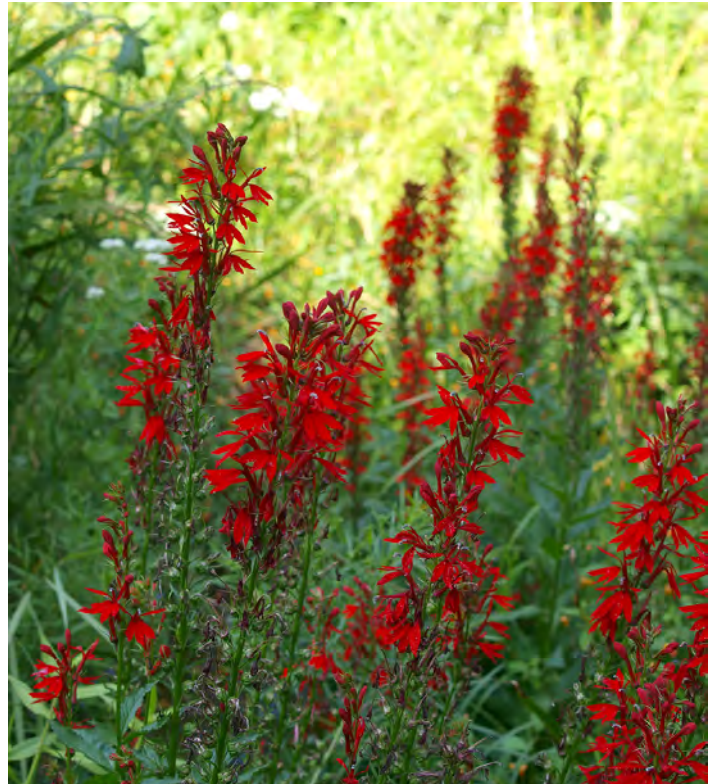
HERB OF THE MONTH

Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*)

by Karen McGowan, Master Gardener

This month's profiled herb is a towering one that is a Texas and North American native: Cardinal flower. The earliest recorded reference of the plant is by English botanist John Parkinson in 1629, who noted "it groweth neere the riuer Canada, where the French plantation America is seated." Named for the French botanist Matthias de L'obel, cardinal flower has been exported and cultivated in Europe for its attractive flowers dating back to the seventeenth century. Cardinal flower is found growing throughout the wild: along waterways in Texas in the Valley, and readily located in wet, shady areas in most of the United States.

A member of the Campanulaceae (Bellflower) family, cardinal flower grows up to around four feet tall and spreads to about three feet wide, featuring showy spikes of scarlet flowers that beautifully crown the foliage from mid-summer to early fall. The flowers are ideal for cutting. Cardinal flower tolerates average to wet soils, so it may be just the thing for that slightly swampy spot in your garden that never seems to drain properly – as long as it's also in partial shade, which is the preferred light environment for this herb. Keep in mind that cardinal flower is deciduous, with its relatively coarse texture providing an interesting juxtaposition against other garden plants with finer foliage. Cardinal flower is self-seeding, and will require only occasional maintenance. Early spring is the best time to clean it up a bit, just prior to its resuming active growth for the season. While it is a great choice for attracting butterflies and hummingbirds, be aware that cardinal flower does have a level of toxicity to both humans and animals. In the winter, cardinal flower dies back to a circular ring of leaves called a basal rosette. These leaves are resistant to cold and allow the plant to continue to produce and store food. Cardinal flowers reproduce when stems are partially buried. New plants grow where the buried leaves are attached to the stems. Although the cardinal flower is a perennial, meaning it lives more than two years, its active blooming window is short-lived, with the mature plant height varying dependent upon environmental conditions. Cardinal flowers are designed as such that they can only be pollinated by hummingbirds. The vivid red flowers (and sometimes pink or white) begin to bloom usually in mid to late summer, roughly paralleling hummingbirds' southern migration, and the tiny birds are attracted to the blooms' bright color and abundant



Cardinal flower (Lobelia cardinalis)" by Steve Guttman NYC is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

nectar. Hummingbirds in turn carry the pollen long distances, ensuring the plant's spread and survival.

Cardinal flower contains the alkaloid lobeline, which has a similar effect upon the nervous system as nicotine, and the sap of the plant has been known to cause skin irritation. Although cardinal flower possesses toxicity, it is actually used for medicinal purposes. Emetic (vomit-inducing), expectorant and nervine (affecting the nervous system), the plant's actual toxicity level is not fully established in scientific data. The root is analgesic, anthelmintic, antispasmodic and stomachic. Historically, a tea made from the roots has been used in the treatment of epilepsy, syphilis, typhoid, stomach aches, cramps, and worms. Poultices of the roots have been successfully applied to sores that are hard to heal. The leaves are analgesic and febrifuge (fever-reducing). A tea made from the leaves is used in the treatment of croup, nosebleeds, colds, fevers, and headaches.

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Cardinal Flower, *cont'd from pg. 6*

The perennial cardinal flower and several other species are cultivated as ornamental garden plants. Notable among this group is the dwarf blue trailing lobelia (*L. erinus*) from South Africa, which, with its numerous varieties, forms a familiar bedding plant frequently used for edging (quick designer's note; the purplish variety of this, with its vivacious blooms and feathery texture, is one of my absolute border-buffering favorites). The unusual *L. tupa*, a Chilean perennial 6 to 8 feet high, has reddish or scarlet flowers. Slender lobelia (*L. tenuior*), with blue flowers, is Australian and grown in the greenhouse. Southern lobelia (*L. georgiana*), from North America, as well as great blue lobelia (*L. siphilitica*) and its hybrids, also have blue flowers. Various lobelia hybrids constitute a fine group of fairly hardy and showy garden plants.

There is an interesting legend that claims that merely touching the root of a cardinal flower will bring love to the lives of elderly

women! I was curious about the origin of this legend; however I could not locate additional information. If you are an herb historian with a revelatory background on this, I would love to hear about it.

With abundant rains over the past several months in many of cardinal flower's growing areas – given the plant's love of damp conditions – 2023 should be a great year to spot this plant blooming on nature hikes. Here's to color-filled wandering, wherever your trails take you!



Cardinal flowers along the water's edge in Inchetucknee Springs State Park Columbia Co., Florida

Photo courtesy https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:06-08-16_LobeliaCardinalisIR.jpg

Citations:

<https://www.britannica.com/plant/Lobelia>

<https://buchanansplants.com/plant-library/texas-native/cardinal-flower/>

<http://www.naturalmedicinalherbs.net/herbs/l/lobelia-cardinalis=cardinal-flower.php>

<https://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/wild/species/cardinalflower/#:~:text=Legend%20has%20it%20that%20the,the%20lives%20of%20elderly%20women!>

Dealing with Wildlife in Your Garden

by Terri Simon, Master Gardener

Some gardeners want to attract them; others, like myself, don't want them around. My first warning to gardeners is to think twice before you begin feeding or planting to attract wildlife. They may be cute at first, but when they begin eating the produce that you have worked so hard to grow, then it can become a problem. Remember, critters, vermin, varmints, whatever you choose to call them, have no boundaries. Squirrels in particular are extremely clever and will steal, eat or damage the plants you have grown. They will invite their friends. Before you know it, you will be hosting a squirrel fest. Raccoons are nearly as bad.



Bunny feasting in the garden
Photo courtesy hgtv.com

When dealing with wildlife that is attacking your garden, the first thing you should do is identify the animal. Are there scat droppings? There are websites that can help identify the culprits. Try <https://icwdm.org/identification/feces/scat-id/> to see if you recognize the animal's droppings. Do you see animal footprints around? Try checking online for an identification guide such as <https://www.greenbelly.co/pages/animal-tracks-identification-guide>. There are many others. Birds may also appear to help themselves to the banquet. One thing to keep in mind is that the methods you choose should not prevent pollinators from pollinating your plants.

Whatever method you choose, remember some are easier and much less expensive than others. Unwanted critters like an accumulation of trash. Get rid of any trash piles or debris around the garden or your yard. Another easy method is keeping your compost covered, and not leave pet food outdoors. For rural areas, let grasses grow around your fence line. Animals are wary of exposure and are less likely to venture out into open areas where they can be easily spotted. Your own pets can occasionally keep pests away. Dogs and cats can be territorial. Be careful though, because sometimes your own pet is the guilty party raiding your garden goodies. A good friend of mine had her dog nearly wipe out her watermelon patch. Apparently, he had a sweet tooth.

Once you have identified the guilty party, you can try an exclusion method or repellents. Exclusion methods usually cost more money and work. Raised beds can help. Appropriate fencing

such as wooden, plastic mesh, or metal wiring can be used. If your problem is deer, remember there is usually no plant that is completely deer proof. If deer are hungry enough, they will try any plant. They are also excellent jumpers and are capable of crawling beneath a plastic mesh fence.



Rodent destroying a garden
Photo courtesy of urbanleaf.com

Porcupines can climb, squirrels and rabbits are active at dusk and dawn. Birds can yank germinating seeds out of the ground. Many critters are anxiously waiting for the buffet to open.

Repellent methods can vary widely. Decide if you want to spray the individual plants or the entire garden itself. Some repellents are suited for landscape plants only, not edible produce.



Balloons to scare birds
Photo courtesy amazon.com

Read labels carefully. Check your garden daily so you can monitor any damage immediately.

Remember that one repellent may deter some wildlife, but not others. One easy organic method to try for squirrels is chili powder. Spread it around the plants they are eating and see if that works. Also keep in mind that weather such as rain can wash away or dilute the repellent and then it must be reapplied. Sometimes animals adapt to the repellent and you must change gears and switch to another.

If you use traps to relocate the varmints please follow local and state laws. There are some tactics that are not effective. Fumigation, ultrasonic noise makers and broad spectrum insecticides that kill all pests in the area should not be used.



Do some careful research once you determine who is attacking your garden. There are many available deterrents but time, money and effort are sometimes required. If all else fails, try planting a smaller garden patch away from your primary beds. Warning, this is not always effective. They are wild animals and may think of this as an appetizer. Good luck!

Possum waiting for relocation.

PLANT OF THE MONTH

Loropetalum chinense

by Becky Lowicki, Master Gardener

March is prime-time for early bloomers on the cusp of spring and this burgundy beauty of a shrub is a top choice for the Houston region.

Known for its fringe-flower blooms in the March-April time-frame, Chinese fringe flower, as its commonly known, boasts delicate feather-duster clusters of bright pink or white tassels for periods of up to two to three weeks amidst bold, deep maroon-purple foliage.

The genus name, *Loropetalum*, is derived from the Greek words *Loron*, or strap, and *petalon*, which refers to the long, thin petals of its fringe-like blooms. *Chinense* refers to China as its native country of origin, of which it is derived, along with Japan and Southeast Asia.

Versatility abounds for this shrub as *Loropetalum chinense* makes a classic mass foundation, border or fence-line planting, as well as a singular accent point along a patio or poolside. Easily adaptable to shape when pruned to form a hedge, the freeform spires of this plant are even more glorious when left to form a more natural display reaching heights of typically 6 to 8 feet, although not uncommonly 20 feet or more if left to stretch skyward, and then lightly pruned over time to form a shape resembling more of a large Christmas tree.

The shrub has a rounded to vase-shaped, multi-stemmed habit with arching branches and the leaves are dark green, alternate and elliptical with asymmetrical bases.

Popular pink-flowering cultivars abound: a few standouts include the following

- **“Blush”** – Along with ‘Burgundy’, it is one of the original two introductions of var. *rubrum*. With a growth habit that is more compact and denser than “Burgundy,” new growth foliage



Blush

is bronze-red that matures to an olive-green. Flower color is fuchsia pink. There are 5-10 blossoms in a cluster and peak bloom time occurs in April with additional blooms occurring sporadically during the rest of the growing season. It reaches approximately 8 feet tall and wide. It has also been labeled as “Razzleberri.”

- **“Burgundy”**– New leaves are reddish purple, turning purplish green to dark olive green with age. In autumn, the oldest leaves turn orange-red to red. Clusters of 4-7 hot pink flowers are produced most prolifically in spring and then sporadically throughout the growing season. Reaches a height of 6 to 10 feet with a similar width.
- **“Carolina Midnight”** – Large evergreen, upright-growing shrub that may reach 10 to 12 feet tall and 8 to 12 feet wide with deep fuchsia-colored flowers and deep purple foliage. May be grown as a tall hedge or as a small tree.
- **“Darkfire”**– Mid-sized cultivar has very deep dark foliage that remains purple even during the heat of the summer. Plant size is five to six feet tall and wide with pink blooms.

- **“Jazz Hands® Dwarf Pink”** – Dwarf cultivar grows 12 to 26 inches tall by 36 inches wide with a mounding habit. Flowers are very dark pink, and foliage is purple with a cranberry undercurrent. Also available in a the first variegated variety.



Jazz Hands Variegated® is the first ever variegated loropetalum. New growth is splashed with pink and white variegation, while mature foliage is a rich purple color.

- **“Plum Delight®”** – Cultivar grows to 6 to 8 feet tall and wide with dark pink flowers and foliage that emerges rose-purple and matures to bronze-purple.



cont'd on pg. 10

Plum Delight

Lorapetalum chinense, cont'd from pg. 9



Purple Pixie

- **“Purple Pixie”** – Foliage is an intense deep purple, and blooms are a vibrant hot pink. Much smaller, the mature height is one to two feet with a spread of four to five feet. New growth tends to be ascending, but over time cascades downward. It is well suited for use as a groundcover, a container plant or cascading over a wall.

White-flowering forms include the following:

- **“Carolina Moonlight™”** – Dense, compact shrub generally reaches 3 to 4 feet tall while spreading 4 to 5 feet wide. A prolific bloomer from late winter to early spring and then flowers sporadically throughout the season.
- **“Jazz Hands® Dwarf White”** – A smaller cultivar which grows 12 to 36 inches tall with a 36-inch spread and a mounded habit. Flowers are white, with green foliage.
- **“Emerald Snow®”** – New growth foliage is lime green aging to hunter green, accented by white-flowers. Grows 4 feet tall by 4 feet wide.



Emerald Snow

References:

North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox ([ncsu.edu](https://www.ncsu.edu)), and Clemson Cooperative Extension Home & Garden Information Center ([Clemson.edu](https://www.clemson.edu))

- **“Snow Muffin®”** – Characterized by a dense, growth habit low to the ground when young, developing into a roundish mound as it ages. New leaves are light green, maturing to dark olive green with abundant white flowers from late winter to spring. Mature height reaches 1 to 3 feet with a width of 2 to 3 feet.



Snow Muffin

Climate considerations

Prefers full sun with some afternoon partial shade for the best flowering and leaf color. Cold hardy in USDA zones 7-10, an optimal choice for the Houston region.

Soil

Grows best in rich, moist, well-drained, acidic soils. In cooler climates. Mulch the root area to protect the plant in the winter as well as help retain moisture during the summer months. It is intolerant to alkaline soils and may develop chlorosis.

Adaptability

Easily transplanted, and pruning may be needed to maintain its size and shape, overall requires minimal maintenance. Once established, the shrub is drought tolerant. Recommended spring planting to enhance best growth prior to cooler temperatures in the winter season.



Lorapetalum as a tree



March Gardening Calendar

by Karen Shook, Master Gardener

“The garden is a lot like a puppy: it needs care and attention every day. And like a puppy, it pays you back with endless rewards, the kiss of bloom on fruit, the sweet fullness of a fresh pea.” ~ Deborah Madison

Perennials and Ornamental Grasses

- Finish dividing fall and summer blooming perennials and grasses,
- Get transplants in the ground.
- Fertilize established perennials and ornamental grasses.
- Cut back brown ornamental grass foliage.
- Continue planting natives as the weather and soil warm.
- Fertilize established native perennials.

Annuals

- If you are a bit jealous seeing cool season annual beds in full bloom and regretting that you didn't plant in the fall, consider buying some well-established (4" pots) plants. If you did plant in the fall, deadhead old blooms to keep beds looking fresh.
- Warm season annuals can be started from seed or transplants.
- Fertilize new plants to give them a strong start and fertilize established plants to give them a boost.

Bulbs

- Plant gladiolus (and other summer flowering bulbs). Plant gladiolus bulbs every 2 weeks from January through May for successive blooms.
- Remove fading flowers and developing seed pods on your spring blooming bulbs.
- Provide a light application of fertilizer for spring blooming bulbs showing active growth..
- Most bulbs will do best if divided every two to three years.

Roses

- Fertilize monthly, with first feeding after the spring pruning.
- Once you see new growth, it is time to start your weekly fungicide spray program.

Citations:

A Garden Book for Houston. 2nd ed., River Oaks Garden Club, Houston, Tx 1968.

Groom, Dale, and Dan Gill. Texas Gardener's Handbook. Cool Springs Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2012.

Richter, Robert. Month-by-Month Gardening Texas. Cool Springs Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2014.

Weather.gov/wrh/climate

While you are out enjoying spring in the garden, keep an eye out for slugs and snails making their appearance and keep up with the weeding. As always, check for “too wet, too dry, just right” and water accordingly. The average temperature in March is mid to low 60's°F and typical rainfall is 3.2 in.

Shrubs/Trees

- Fertilize established shrubs every 6 to 8 weeks. (3:1:2 or 4:1:2 good choices).
- Prune (if needed) and fertilize azaleas after blooming is complete.
- Finished planting any new shrubs (or trees) to give them a chance for roots to grow before hot weather arrives.

Lawns

- Lay sod as needed in bare areas.
- Mowing and bagging can help discourage weeds.
- Don't overwork the lawn this month. Let the growing roots get a good start.
- Watch for brown patch. It likes cool, moist weather. Treat with fungicide labeled for brown patch.

Groundcovers and Vines

- Finish up ground cover plantings to get them established before summer heat is with us.
- Fertilize established ground covers. If they are looking ragged, it is late, but not too late, to trim.

Vines

- Most woody vines bloom in the spring; don't prune until after they bloom.
- It is a good month to plant vines.

Edibles (vegetables, herbs, berries, fruits)

- See the following link for recommended planting times: [Harris County Vegetable Planting Guide](#)

Trees

- Fertilize young, but established trees this month when you see new growth. Well established, older trees generally don't need extra fertilization.
- Fertilize crape myrtles in early spring and again in early summer.



GREEN THUMB NATIVE PLANT WORKSHOP

March 25th



Learn how to grow and propagate native plants! *Each participant will go home with seeds and a native plant!* BYO gardening gloves! Adults with children welcome to bring children free of charge.



25 MARCH
9am-10am

ROBIN YATES
MASTER GARDENER



Genoa Friendship Garden
1210 Genoa Red Bluff Rd.
Houston, TX 77034

\$15 REGISTER HERE: bit.ly/3lzFWB3

For questions email lilianna.bauerlein@ag.tamu.edu



Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service provides equal opportunities in its programs and employment to all persons, regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, disability, age, genetic information, veteran status, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

NATIVE PLANT OF THE MONTH

Corpus Christi Fleabane (*Erigeron procumbens*)

Article and photos by Robin Yates, Master Gardener

In our ongoing adventure learning some of nature's ways to cover the ground, we come to one of my favorite little plants, Corpus Christi Fleabane, *Erigeron procumbens*. It is not well known, yet it is a lovely flowering native plant that I would like to introduce you to. You may have seen its relative, *E. philadelphicus*, or Philadelphia Fleabane, which is a common wildflower in Houston that is native to the northeast U.S.

Corpus Christi Fleabane is a perennial herb that is low growing, typically to six inches. The flower is white with a yellow center. Some of the rays turn from white to pink. It blooms from February through July, yet here in southeast Texas, it may bloom on and off throughout the year. The genus name, *Erigeron*, comes from the Greek *eri* ("early") and *geron* ("old man"). This presumably refers to the fact that it flowers early in the spring and its white rays look like an old man's beard!



Corpus Christi Fleabane in a non-blooming state



Corpus Christi Fleabane

E. procumbens does well in full sun to part shade. It is at home, as you might guess, in coastal or near-coastal localities, thriving in wet depressions between dunes to drier, open, sandy roadsides. It does well in most well drained soils, being most at home in sand. It remained green through the Christmas freeze, when practically everything else went dormant.

This native plant spreads by runners and seeds. It does not require any special attention or conditions to cover an area of your bed or yard.

Corpus Christi Fleabane is pollinator friendly, attracting moths, butterflies, and bees galore! It makes a wonderful addition to any landscape, adding a graceful, delicate native flower to the palette of plants you have chosen. I invite you to visit the new bed I am constructing at the Genoa Friendship Gardens. I will be happy to show you *E. procumbens* showcased as a groundcover amid the native grasses and forbs. I hope you are excited that spring is right around the corner. I sure am.

Getting Down to Earth

Article and photos by Pam Longley, Master Gardener

News from Genoa Friendship Gardens

Ah, early Spring is here and so is Cleaver (*Galium aparine*), also known as catchweed, gooseweed and sticky willy. It hits our gardens in February and dies out in a few weeks. Cleaver's Velcro-like quality is annoying but it "hitchhikes" well due to this characteristic which allows these weeds to be so successful in their widespread proliferation.

The species name, Galium, means "to seize". That fits! Believe it or not, raw young shoots can be added to salads or boiled and buttered as a vegetable. The chopped leaves and stems can be added to soups and stews. In ancient times, Cleaver was thought to act as a diuretic and used to relieve edema and bladder infections as well as swollen lymph glands, jaundice and wounds. Cleavers can also be matted into a netted bunch to be used as a natural strainer or as a stuffing for mattresses, if you are desperate.

The GFG gardens are amping up with newly planted spring flowers and the carrots, pak choi, swiss chard, garlic and onions are coming along nicely. The broccoli trial continues to be a bit of a disappointment, but we had a lot of weather impediments to a good harvest, of course.

Seen at GFG:



Cleaver (*Galium aparine*)

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cont'd on pg. 15



Memorial to Georgia Lau, Master Gardener and GFG volunteer 2003-2022 with native Black Cherry Tree



◀ Matthew Hagy, Intern, volunteering in the Butterfly garden



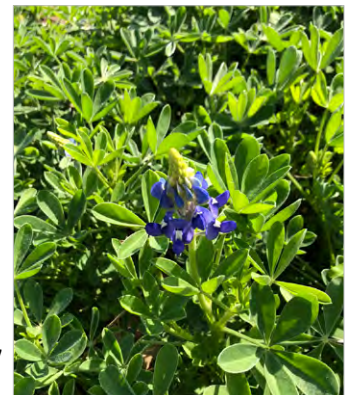
▲ Pam Jackson, Intern, prepping the trial bed for transplants



◀ Rhonda Terracini, Intern (l) with Becky Guillory, Master Gardener cleaning pots for bumping up seedlings



Burgundy Broccoli



First bluebonnet!

Getting Down to Earth, *cont'd from pg. 14*

Article and photos by Dale Hudson, Master Gardener

Christ the Good Shepherd Garden - Spring, TX

If you are one of the office types, or maybe a work-from-home type, then perhaps you are taking your clue from Punxsutawney Phil and have crawled back in your den for another six weeks, but if you are a South Texas Gardener you are acting much differently. Yes, the mornings may still be dark and chilly but we are quietly nudging our gardens back to life and health.

Just to be sure I wasn't dreaming, I checked back to my notes from this time last year, and yes it's true, we were crowded in the greenhouse tending our tomato and pepper starts, bumping up our basil and marigolds, and thyme and oregano and several other cups filled with non-descript seedlings all of which had a stem and two leaves and no identifying characteristics other than something scribbled on a popsicle stick stuck in the side of the cup. That's how our year starts. Come to think of it, that's probably why gardeners everywhere call anything coming out of a greenhouse, starts.

Outside in the garden, in the wind and the rain and the cold are our 2500 green onions, our 3 beds of kale, one lonely bed of

carrots, and last but not least our two beds of broccoli that make up the TXAgriLife trial program. I've written about the broccoli trial in past articles. Starting with the hapless 2-leaf starts, followed by the deep freeze, followed by the rain deluges, followed by the cutworms, but through it all we've managed to keep 49 out of 59 original transplants alive. Most, not all, but most are thriving and for the first time I'm optimistic that we will soon have heads to measure and weigh and report to the trial overseers for the five participating counties in the region.

Before I wrap up I want to give a shout-out to two special gardener volunteers at CGS. Mike Chidelik has been a volunteer at CGS for the past 6 years. He has

been one of the most enthusiastic members of our team and has stepped in to do anything from weed pulling, to compost making to general tool and machinery maintenance. Mike is leaving our community to address changing family obligations and he will be sorely missed. Happy gardening in your new setting Mike. Secondly, I would like to recognize Debora Maly. Deb joined the CGS team as a MG intern from the recent class and she fits in like an ole-timer, as she fast-tracks herself into a contributor at any job she is assigned. This winter we find her in the greenhouse come rain or shine, and she can brighten even the most cold and cloudy days. Thanks Deb, for your assistance to our team, and in turn, your service to the less fortunate community that we serve.



The TXAgriLife broccoli trial at CGS continues to thrive in the face of multiple adversities. Chances of a measurable crop are looking better every week.



Team Lead Brenda Fabian has a big job to hand water all the tomato and pepper and herb seedlings in the CGS greenhouse this month.



Charlie Dorchek(L) and Mike Chidelik have just finished the monthly side-dressing of our green onion beds with 20-0-0 fertilizer.

'BUG' OF THE MONTH

Earthworms

by Debra Caldwell, Master Gardener

We are usually happy to see earthworms in the garden because we think they are a sign of good, rich soil. But in recent years the story has become more complicated. Technically, not a 'bug', earthworms are segmented invertebrates in the Phylum Annelida which also includes leeches and bristleworms.

Earthworms eat and shred organic material, increasing the surface area and making it more available to microorganisms which continue the decomposition process. Earthworms burrow through soil creating tiny tunnels for air, water, and nutrients. Their castings or 'worm poop' makes nutrients available to plants.

Earthworms are divided into three groups based on where they live in soil.

1. Litter dwellers or compost worms don't burrow much and live in leaf litter, compost piles or manure piles on top of soil. The red worm *Eisenia foetida*, is an example.
2. Top soil dwellers live in the upper layer of soil. They ingest large amounts of soil, pass it through their guts and excrete rich castings. They often come out of the soil after a heavy rain.
3. Subsoil dwellers such as the common earthworm or nightcrawler, *Lumbricus terrestris*, dig burrows that can be five to six feet deep. They feed on surface organic matter and help move it deeper into the soil, aerate and improve penetration of water into the soil. This is the typical earthworm that you will find in your garden soil.

Many of North America's native earthworms were killed during the last ice age. Most of the worms we find in our gardens are European earthworm species. Technically, they are invasive species and have altered native forests. In our gardens, they are considered to be 'good guys' who enrich our soil.

Recent newcomer worm species from Asia have become much more of a problem. Jumping worms, also known as snake worms or crazy worms, *Amyntas* and *Metaphire* species, have been found in over half of the states in the United States including Texas. Jumping worms outcompete their European and native cousins because they are voracious consumers of organic matter and reproduce asexually without mates.

Jumping worms are litter dwellers which may be found in the top two or three inches of soil. They quickly eat organic matter on the surface and in the upper inches of soil leaving crumbly

granules that look like coffee grounds or taco meat. The chemistry, structure and community of organisms that lives in the soil change. Fewer nutrients are available to plants, less water is retained, and the soil may wash away. While they are a gardener's nightmare, there is even more concern for forested areas where jumping worms cause the soil to pull away from tree roots in a process called 'gingivitis of tree roots'.

How do you know if you have jumping worms in your garden? Mature jumping worms have dark pigmentation, a white ring, called a clitellum, that encircles their whole body close to their heads (bottom worm in photo). Their bodies are shiny and rubbery. In contrast, nightcrawlers (top worm in photo) are lighter brown with a pink, raised clitellum that doesn't completely encircle their bodies and is located about a third of the way down the body. Common worms have more slimy, squishy bodies. The telltale sign of jumping worms is their behavior. When you touch them, they thrash wildly while common European nightcrawlers stretch and wiggle.



Nightcrawler and Jumping worm

Photo by Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

How do jumping worms get into a garden? They may come in a bag of mulch, potting soil or in a potted plant. Egg cases, called cocoons, full of eggs can be transported on shoes or tools. The cocoons look like peppercorns. Jumping worms can be killed by freezing weather but the cocoons survive over winter. Baby worms emerge from the eggs and grow to full size by summer.

How can you control jumping worms in your garden? Currently, there is no effective method for eliminating jumping

cont'd on pg. 18



A PENCHANT FOR PERENNIALS

Vitex, Texas Lilac, or Chaste Tree (*Vitex agnus-castus*)

by Cindy Barger, Master Gardener

As we move into March, hopefully leaving behind any remnant of winter, we gardeners are more than ready to get outside, readying the beds and working the soil, figuring out what we might want or need (same thing, right?), and making our way to all the nurseries.

For those of us who have perennials in our yard, we look forward to seeing what is the first to come back. In our yard the Texas Gold Columbine (Hinckley's Columbine) is always the first to bloom. It has been putting out new growth for more than a month now and I expect to see some vibrant yellow flowers sometime in March.

Another perennial whose return I anticipate each year, and another Texas Superstar like the Texas Gold Columbine, is the vitex tree, a woody perennial.

Vitex, also referred to as the Texas Lilac or Chaste Tree, is often listed as a member of the Verbenaceae family, although phylogenetic studies indicate that it should be attributed to the Lamiaceae family instead. According to William C. Welch and Greg Grant's *Heirloom Gardening in the South* it originated in China and India, but it has since naturalized in the southeastern United States and many now consider it a native..

The vitex is an upright fast-growing deciduous tree (reaching 12-15 feet) that prefers full sun but tolerates partial shade. It has a cold hardiness zone of 7, and our two trees survived the extreme cold temperatures we experienced in both February 2021 and December 2022. It has tall terminal cone-shaped spikes of purple, lavender, or blue flowers, although there are a few cultivars with pink or white flowers. A few recommended

Texas Superstar cultivars are "Montrose Purple," "LeCompte," and "Shoal Creek."

Vitex depends on summer heat to encourage profuse flowering, and like other summer-blooming trees and shrubs it benefits from deadheading. A repeat flush of blooms can be encouraged by pruning heavily after each blooming cycle. According to Skip Richter in his *Texas Month-by-Month Gardening*, if you cut back branches to the point where they join other branches you can maintain a more natural plant form. The vitex flowers



Vitex

Photo courtesy TexasSuperstars.com

are aromatic, which may be why another name given to the tree is Indian Spice.

In addition to the stunning flower spikes of the vitex, the foliage and fruit are also worthy of mention. The foliage of the vitex tree is palmate (resembling the palm of a hand), with between five and seven aromatic leaflets that are up to six inches long. There is another common name given for vitex, hemp tree, because the shape of the foliage resembles that of a marijuana leaf. The flowering period

is followed by the formation of fleshy brown or black fruit that contain seeds. The many healing properties of the fruit have been well-studied. In fact, the foliage, flowers, and fruit of the vitex tree all have a long history of medicinal value.

Vitex is very tolerant of drought and heat, making it an ideal large shrub or tree for hot, dry climates. It can thrive in just about any type of soil as long as the area drains well. Fertilizing can be as easy as a layer of compost each spring, or if you prefer you can use a time-released fertilizer. Insect and disease problems are not an issue.

cont'd on pg. 18

Earthworms, cont'd from pg. 16

worms, but you can remove some of them. In warm months, when adult worms are present you can do a mustard pour by mixing 1/3 of a cup of ground hot yellow mustard with a gallon of water onto the soil. The irritating mustard will drive the worms to the surface. Then you can handpick the worms and kill them by dropping them into a jar of alcohol.

Destroy cocoons in a garden bed by solarizing the soil. Cover the bed with clear plastic for two to three weeks in spring or summer to let the soil temperature reach at least 104°F for several days. Adult worms will crawl away to cooler soil.

Unfortunately, most other methods or chemicals that kill jumping worms also can kill beneficial insects, other species of earthworms and other animals.

It's best to be very cautious about materials you bring into your garden to try to avoid invasion by dreaded jumping worms. Don't share plants or other materials from your garden if you know there are jumping worms in your soil or compost.

The Texas Invasive Species Institute is trying to track the spread of jumping worms in Texas. If you suspect that you have jumping worms in your soil, you can send an email with a clear photo and location information to invasives@shsu.edu so they can validate the sighting and use it as part of their tracking data.

Vitex, cont'd from pg. 17

A cautionary note about growing vitex in areas like the Hill Country seems important to mention. In Central Texas the vitex tree is actually considered “invasive,” and the Texas Superstar website (<https://texassuperstar.com>) includes a note of caution to the growers in that area. While vitex is not on any official publication of invasive plants, <https://texasinvasives.org> highlights its propensity to having a weedy nature in certain areas. The website's database indicates that the problem areas are “limestone outcrops and dry creek beds through Central Texas,” with the ecological threat listed as “outcompeting native vegetation.” The Texas Superstar Board believes vitex can be safely used in all areas of the state that do not fit the descriptive properties listed above.

It is always satisfying to add plants to your yard that offer a pop of visual interest that includes both color and movement. Vitex certainly checks those boxes for me, and I look forward to seeing a hazy cloud of swaying purple flower spikes on a hot summer day. Hope you are finding joy in the anticipation of the

return of favorites (and the addition of new favorites) to your yard this spring. Happy gardening!



Vitex

Photo courtesy TexasSuperstars.com

Citations:

<https://texassuperstar.com>

<https://asu.edu>

<https://hgic.clemson.edu>

<https://texasinvasives.org>

Texas Month-by-Month Gardening by Robert “Skip” Richter

Heirloom Gardening in the South by William C. Welch and Greg Grant

Growing with Plants and Nature

Growing with Plants and Nature offers children and their families opportunities for learning about gardening and nature through hands-on activities and lessons focused on plants and the creeping, crawling, and flying creatures with whom the plants share the natural environment.

We provide programs to community organizations, plant sales, fairs, farmer's markets, and other events.



Also, we began to prepare microgreen projects for both plant sales in March.

Returning to Towne Lake Farmer's Market to work along side AAMG after a break for the holidays was another pleasure for us. Lois Pierce led a "hands-on" rock painting activity for the children. Karen Kabacinski, Blanca Elder and Rita Whipple joined in to help each eager child create a piece of "rock art" to take back home.

Our team wants to acknowledge valued team members unable to attend our in-person events. Each month, Regina Gardner puts together a page for Urban Dirt, such as this one, that allows us to highlight our efforts. Also, Jean Trippie gave a welcome

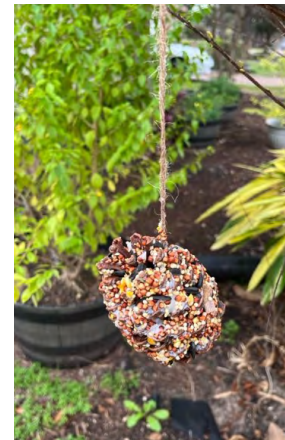
The primary focus of the Growing with Plants and Nature Committee during February was preparing and participating in the Master Gardener Plant Sales. We put together approximately 150 Pine Cone Bird Feeder "grab and go" bags and distributed them at both the Northwest and GFG plant sales. This was a terrific team effort including the two preparation work sessions, and having a table at both plant sales where we distributed them as thank you gifts to families with children. Contributing to our efforts were Master Gardeners Julee Jackson, Diane Walker, Karen Kabacinski, Lois Pierce, Celeste Germany, Vicki Brooks, Susan Visinsky-Bracken, Toni Lawrence, Blanca Elder, Marcia Braschayko and Linda Persse. We were delighted to welcome the enthusiasm and valued input from Interns, Rita Whipple, Pat Whipple, Pam Jackson, Evelyn Dravis and Vanessa Maciel.

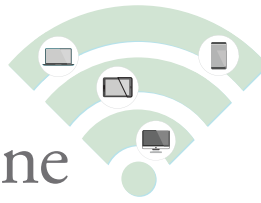


boost to our Pine Cone Bird Feeder project by measuring and bagging all of the bird seed and shortening needed for the plant sale "grab and go" bags.



Thank you to you all!





Ask A Master Gardener Online

by Master Gardeners Lisa Rawl, Debra Caldwell, and Caroline O'Hara

Q: Will this bird cause too much damage to my tree? Do I need to scare it away? It's been on my young oak tree for 3 days at least.



A: Thank you for contacting us about the damage to your oak tree. It is difficult to identify the bird from your photo, but it appears to be a woodpecker—probably a sapsucker. The birds drill holes in rows in trees, particularly in young live oak trees. They can do real damage or even kill the tree. You can wrap burlap around the area with holes and hopefully the bird will go away. Shiny strings, plastic owls and other methods may scare the bird. [Recognizing Sapsucker Damage in Yard Trees](#) is a publication with more information.

The reason sapsuckers attack a tree is that it is probably already under stress and is concentrating sweet sap to deal with the stress or to repair itself. The question to answer is why the tree is stressed. Is it in compacted soil, too wet or dry or is it suffering from some other problem? You can find a certified arborist near you by using the "[Find an Arborist](#)" website. Best wishes for your tree and please contact us again if you have additional questions.

Q: I am a new HOA board member for a Harris County subdivision. I want to communicate with over 1600 homeowners about how to care for their turf/yards. Do you have a brochure that outlines how to fertilize, mow, and in general how to have a healthy lawn? I would hope there is information included on how to minimize weeds in the lawn.

A: Thank you for your email. I'm the landscape chairperson of my neighborhood's HOA and understand how important it is to get good information to homeowners! Even if homeowners don't do their own lawn maintenance, I think it's important that they know how the lawn should be taken care of so that they can communicate that to their lawn services. I've listed a lot of resources below that I share with homeowners in my neighborhood; this is the same information we share with Harris County residents who send questions into this helpline.

The best defense against many common native and non-native weed species is to keep the lawn as healthy as possible. The Texas A&M publication, [Maintaining St. Augustinegrass Lawns](#), covers all aspects of lawn care for each quarter of the year. If any of your homeowners have Bermuda or Zoysia lawns, we also have similar publications for those - just let me know and I'll send them to you.

Proper watering is one of the most important keys to a healthy lawn, so we also recommend [WaterMyYard.org](#), a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension website and app that will provide residents with information about how much water to apply to their lawn every week. The watering information is very important because overwatering of lawns and landscapes not only wastes water, but it weakens turfgrass, which then contributes to pest and disease issues.

Neighborhoods with maturing trees also have a problem with declining turf due to too much shade from tree canopies. Healthy, mature trees contribute significantly to property values, so you don't want homeowners to trim trees improperly in order to get more sunlight to their turf. Shade trees can be "limbed up" to some extent, but too much pruning can be detrimental to the trees. It can be a delicate balancing act, and sometimes the point is reached where you just can't get grass to grow under a healthy tree - at that point, homeowners will need to use alternate shade tolerant groundcovers and perennials instead of lawns under their trees (Asian jasmine, horseherb, violets, ferns, aspidistra, etc.)

The TAMU website we recommend for all kinds of excellent landscaping information is [Earth-Kind Landscaping](#). If

cont'd on pg. 21

If you are a Harris County MG, interested in volunteering for AAMG Online and want to be trained, please contact Lili Bauerlein at Lilianna.bauerlein@ag.tamu.edu.

Ask a Master Gardener – In-Person Activities

by Margie DiGiacomo, Master Gardener

Our Farmer's Market table hosting activities have resumed. These events are in compliance with COVID protocols, such as wearing masks and social distancing.

Prospective volunteers and interns: if you see that an event is full and it is one that you would really like to attend, please reach

out to Valerie Depew so that we can add you to the volunteer list. Please remember that we want to provide as many opportunities for you to earn your hours and interact with the public!

The Signup is available here: <https://signup.com/go/wBSYeQe>

The full AAMG schedule for March

- Sat., Mar. 4** Mercer Botanic Gardens, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd, Humble, 77338 – 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.
Urban Harvest, 2752 Buffalo Speedway, Houston 77027 – 8 a.m. to 12 p.m.
- Sat., Mar. 11** Tomball Farmers Market, 205 West Main St., Tomball, 77375 – 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
- Tues., Mar. 14** Woodchase Park Community Garden, 3951 Woodchase Dr., Houston 77042 – 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
- Thurs., Mar. 16** Woodchase Park Community Garden, 3951 Woodchase Dr., Houston 77042 – 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
Westchase Farmers Market, 10503 Westheimer Rd., Houston 77042 – 3 to 7 p.m.
- Sat., Mar. 18** Mercer Botanic Gardens, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd, Humble 77338 – 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.
Towne Lake Farmer's Market, 9955 Barker Cypress Rd., Cypress 77433 – 9:30 a.m to 1:30 p.m
Southeast Fruit Tree Sale, 1210 Genoa Red Bluff Rd., Houston 77034 – 9 a.m to 1 p.m
Southampton Centennial Garden Tour 1500 Hermann Drive, Houston 77004 – 12 p.m. to 4 p.m.
- Mon., Mar. 20** GFG Open Garden Day & Plant sale, 1210 Genoa Red Bluff Rd., Houston 77034 – 9 a.m to 1 p.m
- Fri., Mar. 24** Mercer March Mart, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd, Humble 77338 – 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Sat., Mar. 25** Memorial Villages Farmers Market, 10840 Beinhorn Rd., Houston 77024 – 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Mercer March Mart, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd, Humble 77338 – 8 a.m. to 4 p.m
Northwest Spring Sale 8877 Barker Cypress Rd. @ The Berry Center 77433– 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
- Sun., Mar. 26** Memorial Villages Farmers Market, 10840 Beinhorn Rd., Houston 77024 – 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Northwest Spring Sale 8877 Barker Cypress Rd. @ The Berry Center 77433 – 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
Hermann Park Conservancy Kite Festival, Miller Hill and Jones Reflection Pool,
Houston 77004, 9 a.m. - 3 p.m.

Thank you to all of the hardworking volunteers who have been able to get back out there with the public events!

Ask a Master Gardener Online, *cont'd from pg. 20*

you select the link for Landscape Publications, and then select the link for Follow Proper Pruning Techniques, you will find great information for your homeowners on how to properly prune everything in their landscapes. We also recommend the website

TreesAreGood.org, which has excellent tree care information and a Find An Arborist feature to help homeowners find a certified professional arborist to give their trees the best care possible.

Genoa Friendship Gardens



The Flower Trial Garden



The Water Garden



The Greenhouse

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and Harris County Master Gardeners invite you to join us at

The Genoa Friendship Gardens

located at
1210 Genoa Red Bluff Road
Houston, Texas 77034

Weekly Garden Hours: Open all year round, Monday and Wednesday mornings, 9 a.m.-11a.m. (weather permitting).

We welcome professional organizations, schools, churches, and individuals tours of the garden! If interested in a tour, please email Lili Bauerlein, Program Coordinator at lilianna.bauerlein@ag.tamu.edu.

Open Garden Days

are on the 3rd Monday of the month, **March through October**, 8:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.

Admission to the Exhibit Gardens is free, and register at the Welcome Table to receive additional monthly notices for children and family events.

- Tour the variety of exhibits to inspire you with vegetable, perennial, rose, tropical and native gardens.
- Visit our Ask a Master Gardener table for information about planting citrus, fruit or berries for your home orchard, or planting your vegetable garden.
- Contemplate the joy in the Earth-Kind Garden and catch a view of the Water Garden.
- Don't leave the GFG until you have shopped the Greenhouse where seasonal herbs, vegetables and perennials are available for sale until September.

TEXAS A&M
AGRI LIFE
EXTENSION

Home Grown Lecture Series 2023

05
JAN

10:00 - 11:00 AM

Groundcovers for the Landscape

Paul Winski - Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service,
Harris County Extension Agent-Horticulture

02
FEB

10:00 - 11:00 AM

Backyard Poultry Fundamentals

Shannon Dietz - Texas A&M AgriLife Extension
Service, Harris County Extension Agent-Agriculture
and Natural Resources

02
MAR

10:00 - 11:00 AM

Top "T" Questions: Tomatoes, Turf & Trees

Brandi Keller - Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service,
Harris County Extension Agent-Horticulture

Lectures are free & presented on Microsoft
Teams. Please register at:

<http://HomeGrown2023A.eventbrite.com>



The members of Texas A&M AgriLife will provide equal opportunities in programs and activities, education, and employment to all persons regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, age, disability, genetic information, veteran status, sexual orientation or gender identity and will strive to achieve full and equal employment opportunity throughout Texas A&M AgriLife..

*Visit the Harris County Master Gardeners
Facebook page for event details!*

www.facebook.com/HarrisCountyMasterGardeners



Texas A&M AgriLife Extension

in partnership with

Hermann Park Conservancy

are pleased to present

**Master Gardeners in the City
at McGovern Centennial Gardens**

The Harris County Master Gardeners maintain the vegetable, herb, berry, and citrus beds in the Family Garden on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, so if you see one of us working there, feel free to say hi.

McGovern Centennial Gardens at Hermann Park

**1500 Hermann Drive
Houston, Texas 77004**

Extension programs serve people of all ages regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, disability or national origin. The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas cooperating.

Green Thumb 2023 Gardening Series

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and the Harris County Master Gardeners are pleased to offer the FREE **Green Thumb Gardening Series of Lectures**
Got questions? Go to hcmga.tamu.edu/ask-a-question/

Second Monday, 10:00 A.M. – 11:30 A.M.
Houston Community College @Home Gardening Series
Register in advance to receive the link: hccs.edu/community-learning-workshops
Second Monday of each month

- | | |
|---|--|
| January 9 – <i>Soil and Food Web</i> | June 12 – <i>Pollinator Gardening</i> |
| February 13 – <i>Spring Vegetable Gardening</i> | July 10 – <i>Fall Vegetable Gardening</i> |
| March 20 – <i>Benefits of Growing Native Plants</i> | August 14 – <i>Exploring Ethnic Vegetables</i> |
| April 10 – <i>Tips for Great Lawns</i> | September 11 – <i>Growing Roses in Texas</i> |
| May 8 – <i>Gardening with Less Water</i> | October 9 – <i>Trees and Tree Care</i> |

Third Tuesday, 11:00 A.M. – 12:00 P.M.
Harris County Public Library Facebook Live
No reservation required – facebook.com/harriscountypub/events/
Third Tuesday of each month

- | | |
|---|--|
| January 17 – <i>Soil and Food Web</i> | June 20 – <i>Pollinator Gardening</i> |
| February 21 – <i>Spring Vegetable Gardening</i> | July 18 – <i>Fall Vegetable Gardening</i> |
| March 21 – <i>Benefits of Growing Native Plants</i> | August 15 – <i>Exploring Ethnic Vegetables</i> |
| April 18 – <i>Tips for Great Lawns</i> | September 19 – <i>Growing Roses in Texas</i> |
| May 16 – <i>Gardening with Less Water</i> | October 17 – <i>Trees and Tree Care</i> |



Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service provides equal opportunities in its programs and employment to all persons, regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, disability, age, genetic information, veteran status, sexual orientation, or gender identity. The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas cooperating. Individuals with disabilities, who require an auxiliary aid, service or accommodation in order to participate in any Extension activities, are encouraged to contact the Harris County Extension Office at 713-274-0950 for assistance five working days prior to the activity.



The Tomato

Is it a Fruit or a Vegetable? A tuh-MAY-toh or tuh-MAAH-toh?

by *Olina Raney, PhD, Master Gardener Intern*

Tomatoes are the most grown plants in home gardens throughout the area. A brief history of the tomato, its optimal growing conditions and the varieties recommended for the region are provided in this article so as to provide an overview as well as guidance for achieving successful and bountiful production.

A Fruit or a Vegetable?

This an age-old question. Botanists classify the tomato as a fruit while horticulturalists classify the tomato as a vegetable. Most consumers consider the tomato as a vegetable using it in salads, sauces or other recipes eating it cooked or raw.

History

Tomatoes are believed to have their origins in South America and brought to Europe by Spanish priests in the mid-1500s. Italians and Spaniards began growing tomatoes for food. Since tomatoes belong to the nightshade family, many people initially considered them poisonous due to this association. It was not until the early 1800s that tomatoes were widely accepted as food. Leading tomato producing countries are China, India, Turkey, United States, and Italy. Commercial growers in California grow the majority of tomatoes in the United States. A variety of tomatoes are also grown all over the country.

Growing Conditions – Soil, Fertilizer, Water, Sun, Spacing

The tomato plant appears to thrive in variety of soils although good soil will lead to good growth and production. Heavy clay or sandy soil can be amended by the incorporation of organic matter such as compost.

Fertilizers such as 10-20-10 or 12-24-12 are recommended to be mixed into the soil where the tomato plant is grown.

Regular watering is important and good water drainage is needed as well for healthy growth and good production. Cracking of tomatoes or blossom end rot or black spots can occur due to fluctuations in soil moisture. Tomato plants needs at least six hours of sunlight daily.

Spacing of tomatoes should be at least two square feet for each plant. Stakes and trellises are used in home gardens to increase the yield as well as the amount per unit of land and for producing a better quality of fruit, reducing diseases such as fruit rot by keeping the fruit off the moist ground.

Home gardeners enjoy growing tomatoes as a large crop can be produced in a small garden plot as well as in containers for a patio garden. The tomato plant has a distinct smell and produces clusters of yellow flowers which develop into ripe tomatoes in 40 to 75 days depending on the variety.

Varieties

There are over 4,000 varieties of tomatoes. These can be classified into the Determinate and Indeterminate noted by (D) or (I). Determinate, meaning small, also known as Bush tomatoes, seldom are more than 5 to 6 feet tall. A determinate

tomato plant is distinguished by a repeating pattern of two leaves followed by a flower or fruiting cluster. An indeterminate tomato plant has a repeating pattern of three or four leaves followed by a cluster and these can grow more than 20 feet.

Hybrid tomato varieties such as Early Girl V and Better Boy VFN have been recommended for the Harris County area. VFN indicates that the hybrid tomato is resistant to the following diseases:

- V** for Verticillium wilt
- F** for Fusarium wilt
- N** for resistance to nematodes.

The Texas AgriLife Extension service recommends the following varieties for Southeast Texas with Determinate (D) and Indeterminate (I) notation along with the Days to Harvest:

- For tomatoes larger than 12 oz.: Better Boy (I) 70, Bush Goliath (D) 68
- Medium 4-11 oz. producers: Carnival (D) 70, Celebrity (D) 70, Champion (I) 70, Early Girl (I) 52



cont'd on pg. 28

Home Grown Podcast

The Home Grown podcast is presented by the Agriculture & Natural Resources (ANR) Unit of the Harris County Texas A&M AgriLife Extension office. The series provides information on urban agriculture / horticulture / gardening and ag literacy. The program focuses on topics that are relevant to the urban gardener.

The podcast can also be found at the following site: www.listennotes.com/podcasts/home-grown-podcast-paul-OM7PKqityX_/

<https://bit.ly/3w4cUAR>



The Tomato, *cont'd from pg. 27*

- Paste tomatoes: Chico III (D) 70, Roma (D) 75, Viva Italia (D) 75
- Cherry tomatoes, smaller than 3 oz.: Juliet (Grape, I) 60, Small Fry (D) 65, Sun Gold (Cherry, I) 65, Sweet 100 (Cherry, I) 65

Heirloom varieties being grown by the Harris County Master Gardeners include the following Indeterminate tomatoes - Amish Gold Slicer, Black Krim, Cherokee Purple, Japanese Black Trifele

References

Tomato, The World Book Encyclopedia 2000

Neil Sperry's *Complete Guide to Texas Gardening*

Doug Welsh's *Texas Garden Almanac*, 2007

Growing Tomatoes: No Quick Gardening Task - https://aggie-hort.tamu.edu/newsletters/hortupdate/hortupdate_archives/2006/mar06/Tomato.html

<https://aggie-hort.tamu.edu/archives/parsons/vegetables/tomato.html>

Vegetable variety selector - https://aggie-hort.tamu.edu/publications/veg_variety/

<https://aggie-hort.tamu.edu/archives/parsons/vegetables/tomato.html>

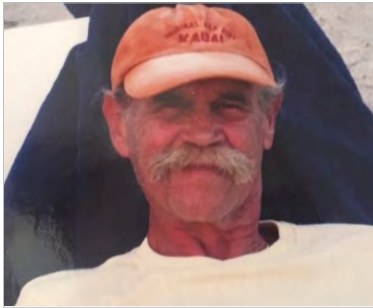
<http://henderson.agrilife.org/files/2011/03/Tomatoes.pdf>



MG of the Month - *Milton Lonnee III*

by Karen Breneman, Master Gardener

Congratulations! Milton is a 2016 graduate. Much work goes into the plant sales and Milton is always there to support these fundraising events. He fills in wherever he is needed, but he especially helps with loading cars and lifting the soil and compost. This has been a tremendous help in sales and the morale of those he's working with on sale days. In addition, Milton also volunteers for various Ask a Master Gardener events.



Milton Lonnee III

Milton was raised in Southern California, where good weather and his mother, a “farmer’s daughter”, gave him the interest

in gardening. Summers at his grandparents’ farm added to the passion. He moved to Houston almost 30 years ago for work. Milton retired, in 2015, from the oil & gas business, where he fortunately had the opportunity to live and work in South America. His work took him to the Amazon jungles of Peru and he spent a year in Colombia, building a pipeline across the Andes mountains.

Milton met and married a young lady from Lima, Peru. They currently have a house there near the beach. Great for summers in January! His favorite pastimes include backyard gardening and traveling. They make a trip to one Caribbean island almost every year, with at least yearly trips to California and Peru.

Milton says the “Best part of belonging to the HCMGA is being around friendly people with the same interests.”

Thank you for all you do, Milton.

Nominate a Master Gardener of the Month



We want to recognize the people who are working hard to keep our organization functioning.

To let the Membership committee know about the volunteers deserving of the award, contact Karen Breneman at kbreneman2017@gmail.com.

Thank you in advance for your nomination!

For Harris County Master Gardeners Only!



March 11th
GFG Saturday Workdays

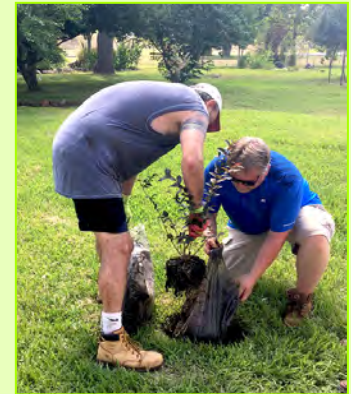
8:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

1210 Genoa Red Bluff Road, Houston TX

Please email Jonathan Correia at jonathan@jonathancorreia.com or text to 832-687-5604 if you would like to work at GFG on a Saturday.

Genoa Friendship Garden Workdays are an opportunity for Interns and Master Gardeners to meet with other gardeners, and to learn by working in a variety of gardens. Test your practical gardening skills and learn from other gardeners' knowledge. Explore the various options of working in a collection of gardens with perennials, proven Earth-Kind® winners, the fruit tree orchard, native plants, composting, and greenhouse activities.

Come and enjoy a few hours working in the garden with fellow Gardeners while gaining your required membership service hours. Work tasks will be outlined, and available to gardeners to seek their interest. Garden leads will be on hand to guide you through the tasks.



For some of you that have considered this a distance you couldn't commit to on a regular basis, it is *always* available if you want to be surrounded by old or new friends.

GFG also offers Mon./Wed. workdays (8:45 a.m. – Noon) for MGs who can attend during the week.

Please join us at our GFG Garden Workdays!

Evan J. Hopkins,
Master Gardener



Have Garden Questions?



We have developed a new form located at <https://hcmga.tamu.edu/ask-a-question/>

You can submit your question and up to three photos. Be sure your photos are focused and clear.



Please subscribe to our Harris County Horticulture YouTube page for access to recorded videos.

Thank you for your support.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel>

If you would like to receive new editions of the *Urban Dirt* newsletter each month, please add your name to the mailing list [HERE](#).




Master Gardeners and Interns who celebrate a birthday during *March* include the following. Wish them **HAPPY BIRTHDAY** when you see them!

Lisa Bedford, Larry Brouwer, Louise Hansen, Evan Hopkins, Parry Kahkeshani, Lisa Lawrence, Lisa Lee John Moss, Linda Pearson, Joe Peddy and Norma Robinson

If your name is missing, please check that your online profile is complete.

Gardening Tools

This chart is a handy guide for knowing the best times to plant in Harris County.

 Vegetable Garden Planting Dates for Harris County	Texas AgriLIFE Extension Service Harris County Office 713-274-0950 https://harris.agrilife.org/hort/												
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	
Planting times are for seeds unless otherwise noted													
Artichoke	Dormant Crowns								Transplants				
Asparagus (dormant crowns)													
Beans - Snap & Lima (Butterbean)			Snap&Lima					Snap					
Beets													
Broccoli (transplants)													
Brussels Sprouts (transplants)													
Cabbage (transplants)													
Cabbage - Chinese (transplants)													
Carrots													
Cauliflower (transplants)													
Chard, Swiss													
Collards (transplants)													
Corn													
Cucumbers													
Eggplant (transplants)													
Garlic													
Kale (transplants)													
Kohlrabi (transplants)													
Leeks	Transplants									Seeds			
Lettuce - also Arugula, Mache, Sorrel													
Melon - Cantaloupe, Honeydew													
Mustard													
Okra													
Onion - bulbing	Transplants										Seeds		
Onion - multiplying/bunching													
Peas - English & Snap													
Peas - Southern													
Pepper (transplants)													
Potato - Irish (cut pieces)													
Potato - Sweet (slips)													
Pumpkin													
Radish													
Spinach													
Squash - Summer													
Squash - Winter													
Tomato													
Turnips													
Summer Greens - Malabar, Amaranth													
Watermelon													

Average Last Freeze Dates (Hobby 2/8, Bush 3/1) ↑ ↑ Average First Freeze Dates (Bush 11/30, Hobby 12/20) ↑ ↑
 Plants grown over winter may require protection during freezing weather. Seeds and transplants started in the heat of summer will benefit from shading during establishment.



TEXAS A&M AGRI LIFE EXTENSION

TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE

EXTENSION SERVICE

13105 NORTHWEST FREEWAY, SUITE 1000

HOUSTON, TX 77040

713-274-0950

harris.agrilife.org/program-areas/hort/

hcmga.tamu.edu

Follow Us On Facebook, Twitter & Instagram

The Harris County Master Gardeners as well as Texas A&M AgriLife Extension - Harris County Horticulture are actively participating on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram offering tips, lists, news and plant advice almost daily. The best part, instead of locating planting guides or insect documents, and sale dates for individuals, you can add the HCMG site to your account and easily share information with others. This is a definitely a timesaver for these busy garden days and helps promote our organization. Reach us via these links:



www.facebook.com/HarrisCountyMasterGardeners

www.facebook.com/HarrisCountyHorticulture



<https://twitter.com/pharrishort>



<https://www.youtube.com/channel>



<https://www.instagram.com/harriscountymastergardeners>

MG In-person Volunteer Gardening Opportunities

Learning Tuesdays at Centennial Gardens

As a reminder, every Tuesday, we will have a 30-minute lesson on a component of the garden for MGs and Interns. So you can get in an hour and a half of volunteer work and 30 minutes (sometimes more!) of continuing education. The workday begins at 9 a.m. We'll take a break mid-morning for a rest and the 30 minute class, then should finish up by 11 a.m. Email **Will Isbell** at mcg.harrishort@gmail.com, if you are interested in attending.

Genoa Friendship Garden

1210 Genoa Red Bluff Road, Houston 77034

Weekday Workdays 8:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Every Monday and Wednesday we are working in the a variety of gardens. They include a large vegetable production garden and Texas AgriLife research plant trial beds. Feel free to drop in to get service hours!

Weekend Workdays 8:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Join us every 2nd and 4th Saturday at our Weekend Workdays. These are opportunities for Interns and MGs to learn and work in a variety of gardens. **Please contact Jonathan Correia at jonathan@jonathancorreia.com or text to 832-687-5604 to confirm work day schedule.**

Gardening on the North side at Christ the Good Shepherd Church (CGS)

Monday, Thursday and Saturday - 8:00 -10:00 a.m.

CGS garden is located between TX 249 and I-45 just north of FM 1960 at 18511 Klein Church Rd, Spring, TX 77379.

All work tools and equipment are provided, including gloves, water, sunscreen, and bug spray. We welcome new faces to join our group. Contact **Dale Hudson** by phone or text at 832-659-7799, or email at UTVOL66@gmail.com.

The garden has 28 raised beds for vegetables and two uniquely designed raised beds for herbs. There is a heated greenhouse where veggies and herbs are started from seed. And, there is a specifically designed composting area where all of the compost and mulch requirements for the garden are met on site. Gardeners with special skills or interests can focus on a particular area and lead or learn in the setting they enjoy.

CGS garden is approved as a Texas AgriLife research site, and as such we conduct plant trials throughout the year.

Would you like to contribute to the Urban Dirt?

Send all questions and/or submissions to: UrbanDirt.harrishort@gmail.com